

ZONE ROUGE

a game about grief and growth during the great war

Executive Summary

Porter Bertrand watches as the town around him transforms with the Western front of World War I. As the front lines approach and his father is taken away to fight, Porter musters his courage to confront the dangers that threaten his family and home.

Game type

Third-person story adventure; maze exploration; stealth; suspense

Synopsis

Porter Bertrand is an eight year-old boy who lives in a tiny (fictional) village called Fleurimont, which is set among the hills around Fort Douaumont. His family owns a farm on the edge of town where he used to spend his days working with his father and playing on the land. Unfortunately, events much larger than any he might control have disrupted his peaceful existence.

Strained systems of alliances and animosity made a powder keg of the greater European continent. World War I began. Porter's father, Rainier, joined the military as soon as the fighting broke out. Now Porter, his mother, and his younger sister struggle with Rainier's absence and have only sporadic correspondence to soothe their worry.

This is where and when the game begins. The player takes control of Porter Bertrand as he assumes an uninvited and daunting maturation. With his father's departure come terrible, vivid nightmares that immerse Porter in the horrors of the battles he hears about around town.

Rainier's letters stop coming, and worry grips the household.

All the while, the village around Porter fills with more soldiers, supplies, and the machinery of war. The dusty main road is crowded with crates and men, some who cause trouble and some who don't. Some of them return from the front, others prepare to move forward. During his waking hours, Porter explores the awkwardly populated town, observes soldiers' preparations for (and recovery from) battle, and all the while seeks information about the war and his father.

When night falls on Fleurimont, Porter experiences a very different side of the war. Tortured by nightmares that reflect the horrible things he's overheard in town and his own fear for his father, he finds himself trapped among the trenches and craters of Verdun's hellish battlefields, a prisoner of the violent night. Wounded soldiers cry out for help, and Porter wills himself forward to assist them.

These are the two distinct worlds in the game: Fleurimont, the peaceful village that becomes each day more important to the arms buildup, and Porter's nightmares on the cratered, gas-ridden, and splintered landscapes of the battlefields nearby.

As the game progresses, Porter learns about the conflict and the men who fight. He speaks with weathered soldiers and proud recruits. He sees the casualties brought into town, he sees the strain put on his mother, and he recognizes wounded men. He finds himself in complicated situations, making moral decisions that affect the outcome of the game. He makes enemies and friends of soldiers and civilians.

The front lines creep closer.

In his nightmares, Porter sometimes encounters a vision of his father. Each of these scenes teaches Porter a new way to cope, to survive, and to comprehend what he sees happening around him. Sometimes he sees things that assure him his father will return safely. Other times he sees things that convince him hope is lost.

Once the front lines reach an unsafe distance from the village, everyone recognizes the need to evacuate civilians. Porter makes preparations with the villagers, helps his sister cope with the sudden change, and proves himself worthy as a functional leader in the family. Arriving at this maturity, Porter goes to bed to face his nightmares one last time.

At the game's conclusion, Porter's father returns to wake him from the final nightmare.

The evacuation of Fleurimont has waited too long, and German artillery shells are landing in the area. The villagers and soldiers seek shelter within buildings and cellars. The Bertrands don't have a cellar and need to reach one on the far side of the village. Porter's father received wounds in battle and needs help, so Porter must lead the family to safety. This sequence's finale is a wrenching display of love and sacrifice that hopes to do justice to the magnitude of loss that these villages represent.

Zone Rouge is a dark game. It's an interactive war drama meant to confront its characters with stark moral contrasts and demonstrations of human cruelty, weakness, and strength. It's designed to provide an experience that's as interesting as it is entertaining, rich, culturally literate, and visually arresting. It has moments that resemble horror games and sections devoted to enjoyable and emotional character connections.

Characters

Porter Bertrand (Avatar) – An 8-year-old boy from a small village in France. When his father is called to fight the war, he finds himself subjected to loss and danger in his dreams. Thrust into a traumatic living nightmare, he feels outmatched and unready to grow up so quickly.

Marie Bertrand (NPC) – Porter's mother. She has joined the effort to supply the war by sewing and cooking for the soldiers moving into the area around a nearby fort with hopes of hearing news about her husband. She keeps a brave face for her children, but she knows the situation is dire.

Rainier Bertrand (NPC) – Porter's father. He left the family to join the army once war broke out. The family hasn't heard from him in a year. He's uncomfortable with violence, and longs for home.

Marianne Bertrand (NPC) – Porter's 5-year-old sister. She adores Porter and follows him around the village when she can. Porter feels the need to protect her from the darker realities surrounding them.

Soldiers (NPC) – The many figures with which Porter interacts in the village and in his dreams. They provide the mission structures for each level, narrative focus for quests, and worrying examples of what might have happened to Rainier.

Villagers (NPC) - The other civilians remaining in the town share their own challenges and fears with Porter, providing further context and richness to the historical fiction.

World

In the Northeast corner of modern France, there are vast areas covered by planted forests.

The hills have pits and pockets that you won't find on similar hills in the region. The landscape has been drastically altered and silenced by human conflict.

100 years ago, though, the scene was very different. These forests were once small villages. People lived at the edges of two powerful nations and found themselves, their homes, and their whole lives destroyed by the Battle of Verdun in World War I. The ruins were declared "Zone Rouge" because gas, shell, and human remains contaminated the land. These villages died, and their populations are now officially zero.

Zone Rouge takes us to one such village and walks us through the horrible transformation of the land and people who lived on it. The front lines come ever closer to the village as the game goes on, and the NPC behavior, clothing, and dialogue evolve to reflect the increasingly dire circumstances.

There are primarily two different kinds of game environments at work: daytime, waking life and Porter's nightmare battlefields.

During the daytime scenes, the game takes place in the fictional village of Fleurimont. It's an open-world town with lines of soldiers and supplies weaving through its dusty roads. Porter performs tasks for the soldiers that will earn him information about his father. Additionally, these interactions will inform the player's choices when Porter reaches the second gameplay environment: his dreams. The NPCs in the town are overwhelmingly

military personnel, but Porter will also meet other civilians. All become more desperate and afraid as the game progresses. The wounded return in much greater numbers as time goes on, as do the dead.

When Porter has completed the day's required tasks in the village, the day ends and he goes to sleep.

The environment for Porter's dreams is the battlefield around the nearby fort, which is modeled after Fort Douaumont. He crawls and runs through the trenches, no man's land, and foxholes of the front lines just miles away from his actual home. Each dream features a different battlefield map, representing Porter's evolving understanding of the war.

The dream-world ground consists almost entirely of upturned dirt and piles of smoking ruin. Trees are bent over, there are massive craters from artillery fire, and both armies shoot almost anything that moves. Porter has to find stealthy ways to evade danger to move about the levels. Environmental dangers include machine gun nests, gas attacks, artillery barrages, and infantry charges. As soldiers die around him, their suffering is audible and any glory of war is completely absent. This war is terrifying, not exhilarating.

As he goes, Porter encounters a cast of desperate soldiers. Unlike the ones in the daytime village, however, these soldiers are either badly wounded or in severe danger. It is up to Porter to solve an environmental puzzle or navigate a section of the battlefield within a time limit. These interactions will sometimes include moral choices, which will impact the game's eventual conclusion.

After he wakes, Porter begins the next day, moving ever closer to the game's emotional conclusion.

Mechanics

A third-person story adventure game, *Zone Rouge* will rely on evocative art, evocative dialogue, and focused level design to develop its anti-war theme.

The concept blends open world environments with a more traditional, linear level format by adjusting and evolving the open-world village of daytime Fleurimont and presenting one-off nighttime dream levels. Once Porter completes the required daytime activities, he goes to bed and experiences a unique nightmare level with its own geography and gameplay.

In the nightmare scenes, Porter never fights; he only evades and interacts with environmental and character puzzles. If he is killed, the player doesn't lose progress, but undergoes a gruesome revival and must resume and continue his trek through the battlefield. Once he completes the required actions within a dream, the nightmare ends.

When he wakes, Fleurimont is not entirely the same place it was before he slept. There are more soldiers, wounded men, coffins, and supplies crowding the streets. The activities available to him change, too. However, the core geography and landmarks remain the same.

Zone Rouge includes four basic kinds of mission activities: stealth, environmental puzzles, evasion, and conversation. Porter sneaks through both the town and the trenches to

accomplish his goals. He may find obstacles in his way that are negotiable by pushing, pulling, or climbing.

Failure on a given activity during the daytime results in a branch in the narrative. Failure during the nightmares, however, results in Porter's harm or death before a resumption of the activity. This is likely to occur frequently, because the nightmare sequences are distinctively more difficult than the daytime levels. The primary differences between failures in the two worlds are that Porter's nightmares place him in physical danger and that his success or failure there will determine the survival of other characters, as well. The daytime scenes offer much less stressful consequences. These levels feature activities that will help Porter learn more about his father's fate, so his success or failure provides mostly narrative consequences.

There are a variety of obstacles to Porter's success during the nightmare scenes. For example:

- The first nightmare features machine gun fire, barbed wire to be crawled through, and a frantic series of infantry charges.
- The second nightmare focuses on the use of artillery, which inflicts the heaviest casualties on both sides. Porter's job will consist mostly of crawling safely through the falling shells and reaching cover safely.
- In the third nightmare, a gas attack turns the battlefield a sickly, fatal green. Porter's tasks focus on the acquisition of gas masks from fallen soldiers before the creeping wall of gas reaches him and the soldier he tries to save.

In the final sequence, when Porter's father asks him to lead the family to safety, the mechanics of the two worlds become one. The town is attacked just before dawn, so the sky doesn't accurately mirror either the daytime or nightmare levels. The violence of the night surrounds them as soldiers and civilians flee the falling shells and seek cover. The houses and other buildings along the main road crumble or burst as the shells land nearby.

Porter's movements and appearance always reinforce the idea that he is an innocent victim.

Collectibles

Throughout the nightmare sequences, the player can find authentic poems from the Great War. The works of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon provide commentary and reflection about the very scenes Porter experiences in his nightmares.

When the player collects a new poem, they will see its text hand-written on a loose, dirty page of a notebook. When viewed, each poem is given a dramatic reading by Rainier.